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A CASE OF SYMBOLISTIC WRITING WITH SENILE DELUSIONS.¹

By ARNOLD L. GESELL, Fellow in Clark University.

The symbolistic writing, which we are about to describe, is instructive because it furnishes in more than usual detail some picture of the mental processes which may dominate a deluded mind. In the present instance the writing is a daily practice and constitutes a tangible, progressive record, which, although it cannot be interpreted in its entirety, is replete with interest and suggestion.

The executor of the "picturesque writing," as he prefers to call it, was born in New England in 1837. He is a rather healthy looking man, above medium height, without marked signs of age or decrepitude; no tremor in his hands; somewhat restless, piercing eyes; an active, eager gait. He enjoyed a common school education which he has supplemented by not a little reading in newspapers and books of a religious nature. He knows his bible well, has a good memory for recent as well as past events, a good vocabulary and a fluent speech. For most of his life he has been a steady, industrious laboring man of reticent disposition. His present occupation, so far as he has any, is vending a liniment, the formula for which he claims to have received from the Lord. Recently he has taken advantage of the curiosity which his extraordinary writing excites and sells specimens of it "to the boys," at a price.

Only a few facts of heredity are demonstrable. The father of J. D. was a stern, self-determined, powerful preacher of the gospel, who received a solemn "call" to enter the pulpit on the occasion of a thunderstorm through which the voice of the Lord addressed him. This dramatic event probably made a deep impression on the son, who now speaks with great reverence of his "sainted father," calls him the Perfect Man, and often alludes to him in his picturesque writing.—"My father never read a sermon. He preached and looked upon his hearers." "The Holy Bible, God, and Common Sense inspired my sainted father to learn his sermons while at work in the field." The mother is also reported to have been a strongly religious minded woman.

J. D. himself relates how his grandmother used to impress him, as a child, with the horrors of hell fire, how she used to show him the devil, peeping through the window, etc. He

¹ *Author's Note.*—I wish to acknowledge my indebtedness to President Hall for suggesting the study and for his kindly interest in the preparation of the paper.

tells a long and tragic story of a childhood dispute he had with his father on the subject of infant damnation.—Why should his little unbaptized cousin be doomed to roast in an eternal hell? “When the wind blew about the eaves they told me it was my cousin moaning.” He relates: “I began to hate God. I never knew before, that God made hell. ‘What a mean fellow God is,’ I thought; I rolled up my fists at him, ready to knock him down if I saw him.” In one of these precocious debates, he says he kicked the bible across the floor. Making some allowance here, for retrospective falsification, the facts still point to an intense religious environment superimposed upon a predisposing hereditary basis.

A brief history of the case will show that it passed only in a most general way through the characteristic stages of true paranoia. Throughout his life J. D. was inclined to be gloomy and brooding by spells, and to fall without serious provocation into moods of obstinacy during which he would not speak for days at a time to wife or brother. Sometimes he showed a grim determination in his manner of work, carrying on his occupation with a semi-fanatic disregard for fatigue or injuries, and taking inward pride in the triumph of his will. Two and a half years ago, he surprised his friends by an unwonted effusiveness. He bubbled over with expressions of his exalted sense of well being, declaring he was a young man again and had never felt better in his life. He was extravagantly courteous, generous, hospitable. When some schoolboys pelted his weather-beaten umbrella, he took it as huge fun, arguing that they were not to be blamed,—but more of this umbrella later. Only once did he have a glint of suspicion about his mental deterioration; but his anxiety was very brief, for he believed that defective memory was a necessary accompaniment of insanity, and consoled himself with the thought that he could still repeat a sermon after having heard it. This mistaken notion as to the nature of insanity may have hastened an acceptance of the delusions that were emerging in his consciousness.

These delusions were from the first almost exclusively of an expansive nature. The ideas of persecution which are so characteristic in the development of paranoia, took only a very mild form, and were always offset by ideas of grandeur; thus, immediately after attributing poisonous qualities to the oil with which he came into contact in the factory, he received from the Lord a remedy to cure the evil effects; and when the Y. M. C. A. and the Church thwarted him in his desire to preach he declared that he was misunderstood, even as Christ was misunderstood, and proceeded to call down grandiose, religious imprecations upon them. He claims that his present omniscience and grand prerogative came to him suddenly, in

something like a glorious transfiguration during which he broke out into song, singing as never he had before. But as a matter of fact, the onset of the delusions was gradual, and their development can be roughly traced. Simultaneously with the feeling of elation and well being already mentioned, he evinced an interest in the work of the "holy healers" then being reported in the newspapers. He declared their miracles were easy and tried his hand at healing one of his friends, by making passes over him, etc. He also began to sit up nights and tried the strength of his will on his wife to prove that he could rouse her from sleep at any hour by the power of his mind. Later he gave way to less self-centered ideas and became the passive instrument of a series of "wonderful manifestations," which took place after midnight. These manifestations consisted of jerkings of the arms and body; they were ascribed to an outside influence, variously interpreted as emanating from his "sainted father" or the Heavenly Lord.

After this experience the developments are more rapid. He talks of going out into the world to preach. The delusions grow to be more and more compelling; at first only of the nature of incidental, nightly adventures, they finally become all engrossing. Kraft-Ebbing's description of *paranoia-religiosa* applies: "Sublime feelings of the suffusion of divine spirit through a sinful body rise into consciousness, and sweep him from all earthly interests and cares." So J. D. gives up his employment, ceases to pay his rent, no longer brings provisions to the house, lets his insurance run out, and when his wife writes to him about the wood-pile he replies with grandiose allusions to his heavenly mission: 'The Lord is running him;' Providence will provide. With time the vague manifestations mentioned above take on a definite form and are filled with a definite content, determined by his former religious brooding. He feels himself called upon to denounce the belief in hell and water baptism. The aimless jerkings of his arms and hands evolve into the controlled movements of a pen upon paper, and for hours at a time during his nightly vigils he writes down what the Lord, his sainted father, Nature, or the Creative Influence dictate to him. He claims to have all things revealed to him 'from 6,000 years before Adam to the final crash of judgment.' He becomes the self-styled "Christian Naturalist," "The Inspired J. D.," "The Cleansed Leper."

We now come to a consideration of the most unique feature of this case—the writing, of which examples are shown in the accompanying illustrations. The inspired executor of this strange script has, since January, 1904, filled some ten volumes, making a total of about 1,000 pages, to say nothing of

numerous letters and other individual documents. One of the volumes before me contains 90 pages, and according to the dates, it took him a fortnight to complete it. At first the books were sacred property which no human eye was privileged to behold, for they contained, as he declared, the revealed groundwork for future sermons. One bundle of books carefully wrapped in paper bears the following label: "For Curiosity. Not for admiration; but for a better purpose. Sacred forever. Don't open." But this injunction is now antiquated; for the author of the volumes takes pleasure in displaying them whenever he has an opportunity. He is somewhat embarrassed by his frequent inability to read what he has written in the past; but saves himself by insisting that the books are of private and personal importance only; they will be bequeathed to some archive for the curious wonderment of posterity, not its enlightenment. The author himself does not refer to the back volumes. It would be useless, he argues; he knows them all. He writes, he explains, as a matter of self education, to get into rapport with Nature, the Creative Influence, and in some mysterious compliance to the scriptural injunction, "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might." "It is," he says, "to educate myself through my hands."

The entries from day to day have no connection with each other, and are limited to a rather definite range of ideas. They are largely in the nature of aphorisms and special commandments, both original and garbled. Following is a selection of examples largely drawn from three volumes written during the early part of the present year:

God—Nature—Love. No formality here. Midnight revelations. Come and see, just as you be. (Title page.)

God, Nature, my Saviour, Angels, Reason, Common-sense, and the Holy Bible inspire me.

Superstition makes men fear.

Why has a man a right to make law more unjust than God's law?

Faith without works avails nothing.

The mystery of life is solved: Harmony, Holy Bible, Nature, Reason.

"Look up" elevates. "Lie down" rests. "Bow down" degrades.

A man must obey Nature's laws in order to be happy.

God has winked at man's ignorance too long already. Awake thou that sleepest and Christ will give thee light.

I will fight until death in defense of God's Holy Bible.

I am will. Fight for God and Humanity forever.

Friends reproach me. I care not. God is with me.

In the name of God and Reason teach what Christ taught.

Let woman enlist with a will equal rights.

The doctrine of eternal punishment is too fiendish to be allowed.

We learn from nature, truth; from man, falsehood.

My meat is to do the will of Him that sent me.

I fully understand what my mission is and the influence that impels me on.

My Saviour and angels are waiting for me; now tell me what can I fear?

God is Nature. Nature inspired Moses to write the law.

A correct concept of God and duty is not taught in any Christian pulpit to-day.

O God, open the eyes of stupid pastors.

I am agent for a . . . enterprise, demonstrator of what Christ meant.

Denied by the platform . . . Try the press. I will.

Sixty years of pent up force caused indescribable misery all from being taught an accursed doctrine.

Teach woman to maintain dignity of purpose and to insist upon her right to protect herself and offspring.

Pure hearts see God, Nature, Harmony, Heaven.

Ignorance creates criminality and crime.

If we are living in harmony with Nature, we need no baptism.

Baptism is mockery if our lives are impure. If pure, we need no baptism.

Progress in the thought to-day: Reason, common sense, faithful service, pure heart, means harmony, Heaven.

The Church to-day is cursed by ineffectual formalism.

God speed the day when our Holy Bible will be understood thoroughly by all.

Can woman the noblest, fall the lowest?

Hell is a condition of mind.

God, Nature, Creative Influence, Spirit Force can be seen by the pure in heart. Without holiness no one can see the Lord.

All pastors and pulpits are as useless as ancient pottery.

Baptism from Heaven, by living in harmony with Nature,—the only genuine baptism.

The Holy Bible is so plain a fool can understand. Why don't others? God speed the day when ignorance shall be unknown in a Christian pulpit.

Ye are in harmony with Nature. All things will be seen. All spirit power needed will be at your disposal.

. . . do the works here spoken.

Money never cured a leprous body.

Home is what we make it.

Pastors are of no more value than old time vessels in modern houses.

Nature-God has found a faithful Christian child.

John the Baptist and others adopted a form that caused bad results.

Heaven and hell are confined within ourselves.

Were this my last breath, facing King Death, this grand thought I would leave to cheer us: Water Baptism in any form is a damnable curse, a stench in the nostrils of Jesus.

The pastor should experiment upon pottery instead of human brains. Shame!

Does my duplicate exist on the earth to-day?

Turning now to the peculiarities of the script in which these revealed sayings are all but concealed, the question arises, to what extent do the "picturesque" departures from normal standards have a meaning? This is, at once, the most interesting and difficult question. I am convinced that many of the fantastic variations of the letters, and the strange irregularities in their arrangement are whimsical rather than symbolic. The employment of dots, faces, extra lines, etc., is often dictated by purely æsthetic and spatial requirements. Although there is evidence that the writer used to make a rough, preliminary sketch of the page, it seems that he now works with a very incomplete visual image, allowing this image to develop as his pen rather aimlessly proceeds in the sinuous lines with which his writing abounds. That is, he indulges in these fantastic deviations from the beaten path, to produce that sense of passivity to a Guiding Power, which passiveness is at once the essence of his self deception, and for us the sign of a disordered inhibition. To the question, "Why did you make that *R* that way?" he answers, "The Creative Influence prevailed upon me to make it so." Often there is no more to be said.

We should, however, not be surprised to find a certain degree of symbolism. The paranoiac described by Noyes (*Am. Journal of Psychology*, Vols. I and II) had a veritable passion for symbolizing which he carried even to the decorations of his room. Sometimes this tendency is so marked as to lead alienists to use the term "symbolizing insanity." Similar to this is the tendency toward mysticism which McPherson says (*Mental Affection*, p. 217) may lead to the "formation of new words to express terms which are the products of the patient's diseased imagination." Chaddock also says (*Outlines of Psychiatry*, p. 167), "The speech and writing of the paranoiac often show striking peculiarities. Certain words are created that have a significance only for him; in his writing he employs

certain signs and symbols that have for him some mystic or delusional meaning."

To a considerable degree the case of J. D. exhibits this symbolizing tendency. Notice, as a first example, the double page shown in Figure 3 (see page 531 of this volume), which reads, *Watchman what of the night? Day dawneth.* Notice particularly the comparatively light aspect and "upward effect" of the right hand page, which are quite in harmony with the sentiment. The faces look upward; the three hands of the letter *t* all point upward, and, of course, the ladder (*H*) mounts upward. Pages which have a gloomier sentiment and speak of "a covenant with death" and "an agreement with hell," present a darker aspect; a mass of black serpents, for example, and the hands point downward.

Such a contrast is clearly shown in Figure 4. The left page reads, *Misery. Knowledge is Weakness. Evil.* The right page reads, *Happiness. Knowledge is Power. Good.* Compare the expressions on the faces of the letters *I* of the left *is* and the right *is*, and of the words *Misery* and *Happiness*; notice also the frail lines of the word *Weakness*, and the snaky appearance of *Misery* and *Evil*. This putting of opposites side by side is not uncommon.

Figure 5 reads, *Chosen of God-Nature for a Purpose. Be Firm. God-Nature-Reason-Jesus Christ-Heaven Everywhere. Yours Forever.* The central figure of the left page is the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, and is a very frequent symbol for Christ. (See Rev. 5:5.) The involved and interwoven manner of writing *God-Nature*, etc., is an attempt of the writer to give expression to his "identity philosophy," or his "philosophy and water;" that is, his idea of the Oneness of God, Nature, Love, Reason, Truth, Spirit Force, Creative Influence, Spirit Life, Unseen Power. He likes to combine all these in thought and writing into one unitary conception.

Figure 6 does not contain much symbolism. The dots may be vaguely interpreted as spirit eyes, and the faces as spirit forms. This specimen shows how intricate and baffling the writing may become. With sufficient shiftings of the base line, however, it may be made to read as follows: *Would you be a real man copy from Nature. Christ was a Naturalist Spirit Force. Accept Christ. Do his will and be a medium. 'Forgive them.'*

Figure 7 is an important document, being drawn up on Easter day. With the exception of a brief legend *Key to Heaven*, this specimen is truly ideographical. Beginning at the bottom (for the motif is "Up!") we have the three links of Fraternity, Love, Truth, symbolizing the Odd Fellow Lodge; next come the compass and square of Masonry, and then the crucifix,

bearing the face of Christ, which stands for Christianity. By these three stepping stones we mount upward until, *Eureka!* we are in Heaven. The close connection, in the drawing, between the three stepping stones is noteworthy.

Figure 10 represents the *Y. M. C. A.* and the *Church* (Protestant), the two institutions against which our subject has semi-persecutory ideas for reasons already given. They are so closely associated in his thought that he calls them the Twins. Figure 9 is the letter *I* taken from this word *Twins*, as it appears in one of the entries. Figure 14 represents the Twins when, after a period of grace he had granted them, they again rejected him. He takes his vengeance and vents his contempt in the expression he gives to their faces.

Figure 13 is the letter *I* in the word *Blind*, and needs no explanation. Figure 15 gives the word *Hell* with its environs. Notice the slender shaft on the left, pointing downward, and supporting a face in agony; notice also the tear-drops on the other faces. Figure 16 is the letter *O* as it appears in the word *who*, referring to a *simple pastor*. It is again an effort to put the appropriate expression (of simplicity) into the face.

Figure 8 is to be regarded as one of J. D.'s signatures, elaborate and full of symbolism. The basal design is a highly ornate boat; the boat with its occupants represents his whole life; it is going down stream to symbolize his declining years. The three occupants are the three life stages. The foremost with the infantile face represents J. D., as "a poor, ignorant child," to use his own self pitying language. The second is "youth nipped in the bud." The third is "the old man;" the lines above his eyes which suggest wrinkles, really are meant to indicate a "sag" in his head. Indeed, he has a slight depression in the top of his skull, which he claims to have received in childhood, and to which he attaches much importance; but the origin of which I have not been able to ascertain. It is hardly necessary to call attention to the fairly successful way in which he has differentiated the three life periods, and how he has indicated in the second the idea of "nipped in the bud." Fastened to the keel of the boat is the stem of the letter *N* which begins the word *Nature*. Smuggled into the boat, as it were, is the word *Impetus*. In the wake is the word *by*. Now putting all this together, and supplying from the context not given in the engraving, we have the following: *I—J. D.—whose life is symbolized by the boat and its three passengers, I who am at one with Nature, desire the Impetus that will come from an endorsement by * * * **

Figure 17 reads, *Create Heaven by living in harmony with Nature's Laws*. The characteristic ladder *H* which begins the words *Heaven* and *Harmony* is this time connected at the bot-

tom with a symbol for Spirit Force, which Spirit Force must furnish the momentum by which we are enabled to mount the ladder to Heaven. In the lower right hand corner is the familiar *Lion of the Tribe of Judah*, and connected with the letter *t* in *Create* he is present again. At his side is a similar but novel figure, the *Lioness of the Tribe of Judah*! It takes these two principles, the male and the female, to *Create*, hence their close attachment to this word. "The lion is the fighter; she is more 'soggy' (sunken down)," was the explanation.

Finally, we have the richly wrought specimen reproduced in figure 18. With some patience the following can be deciphered: *Forsake Ignorance; Awake, Read. Water Baptism in any form* [is a] *Cloak, [a] Sham. Shame on the Tub*. The ground work design extending almost the whole length of the specimen is an armless, legless man, who looks as solemn and massive as an Egyptian god, but who is no other than a base, arrogant pastor ready to "douse" "the degraded persons waiting to be dipped." These latter are represented by a host of faces above the word *Tub*. At the bottom of the page is one prostrate face, and two others, to represent the degraded souls that have already been dipped. The pastor, it may be seen, wears "a priestly livery," and is covered with many parallel lines which represent his "rigid ignorance." On the back of his right hand (for, though armless, he has a pair of hands) is written *1900 years*, referring to the length of time during which the "accursed doctrine of water baptism" has been preached. His left hand bears the word *Wink*. Toward the lower right hand corner near the word *Tub* is "*the lion of the tribe of Judah*," winking at their ignorance. (See Acts 17:30.)

To the question "Why should these last specimens be so much more elaborate than the first?" the reply was, "More Creative Influence," which is at least a suggestion of an explanation, and does not belie the fact that there has been a genetic development. As far back as childhood, we find a school-boy propensity to scribble and sketch. "He was a great hand for such things." In mature life, also, he was wont to carefully mark his gloves and other personal property with the insignia of his lodges and index fingers pointing to his name. These index hands are very prevalent in the picturesque writing. It is related how, when he at one time had occasion to label a bundle containing a sheepskin, he drew a sketch of a sheep and added *s-k-i-n* using this rebus device in preference to the ordinary printed word. It seems that he always took a certain pleasure in the grotesque; he enjoyed the comic pages of the Sunday newspapers and even copied some of their fantastic designs; he was fond of amusing himself and friends by

writing out "funny notes," in which curious shapes, caricatures with enormous heads and tiny feet might appear. Once he was repairing a stove, and on leaving his work he drew up an elaborate sign "Closed for Repairs," and added a series of pictures to illustrate a household event which happened that day. All these trivial things, occurring throughout his life and in his normal state, acquire a certain significance in the light of later developments, and point to a kind of incipient *cacoëthes scribendi*.

At the very outset of his present condition he showed his characteristic tendency to express his delusional ideas in motor terms. One of the first concrete things which the Creative Influence impelled him to do, was to stay up late into the night and arrange the seeds of the Thanksgiving pumpkin, upon a flat surface, so as to read, "*God is Love*." Soon after this event came the umbrella incident, which resulted in the first case of symbolistic writing.

It was a faded, dilapidated umbrella and, to use his own account, "When I was walking by with it, a crowd of boys shouted 'Shoot the umbrella! Shoot the umbrella!' and threw snowballs at it. . . . Now I reasoned that the fault was not in the boys, but in the umbrella, and I concluded that I was carrying about an influence that was causing somebody to do harm." The event made a great impression upon him, and in a half serious, half playful mood, he made sketch after sketch of the old umbrella, which became the point of departure for a great amount of brooding and imaginative thinking. The outcome appears in the title page of the first volume of the picturesque writing. The portion of this title page which is reproduced in Figure 1, reads: *Past History, Present Duty. Shoot the Umbrella! Whatsoever thy Hand findeth to do, Do it with all thy might*. The umbrella in the upper right hand corner being the old one, represents *past history*, an antiquated doctrine, water baptism; the other new umbrella (differentiated by the modern parasol handle) stands for *present duty*, and the scriptural passage is in some way considered an injunction to do picturesque writing. In the most recent specimens the old umbrella still crops out as a symbolistic device, no doubt of exceptional importance. Figure 11 is part of a document which speaks of *Ancient History, Ancient Pottery* and a *Collapsed Patent*. The final *t* in the word *Patent* is shown, and it will be noticed that the idea of collapse is symbolized by turning a stripped umbrella, up side down. In Figure 12, again, there is a reference to *Past History* and *Water Baptism*. Notice the letter *i* in *Baptism* which is the old umbrella again.

It is now quite evident that we are dealing with a mind in which the associative processes, though not running riot, are

very volatile; and what is symbolism but associative thinking raised to a high power? J. D. is by no means a prosaic individual for whom A always suggests B. Indeed he has tried his hand at versification, and evinces a delight in figures of speech. Once he went out of his way to tell me that the same Force which bears the nightingale down will also bear him upward; and on another occasion he abruptly began to speak of a tree. "I think of myself as a tree. The trunk is my body, the branches, my head; the shoots are my thoughts." His wit is nimble. When asked "Why is your liniment necessary; why can't faith in God alone cure?" he promptly answered, "We need Science to assist Nature." When about to wrap up some books, instead of saying "I must put them into a bundle," he said, "I must make a consolidation." All this indicates a far removal from prosaic thinking. Recall in this connection his salient manner of differentiating the Lion and the Lioness of the Tribe of Judah. He delights in drawing contrasts, and making swift transitions in thought and emotional expression. "I am just as able in sarcasm as I am on the height of sublimity. I am the eagle on the top of the cliff and the Lion of Water Baptism below may growl, but I can scream, by the grace of Jesus, I can scream."

The pictorial tendencies of this manner of thought are carried into the picturesque writing, and although this writing is too consistently alphabetic to be called pictographical, it is often so symbolistic as to suggest analogies to the productions of the primitive mind. And since this is a case of senile involution, similarities to the workings of the child mind present themselves even more strongly. Consider, for example, the general character of a child's spontaneous drawing and the facile imagination which causes the child to anthropomorphize and endow with personality the otherwise stupid letters of the alphabet. There is no doubt but that when J. D. is in the act of writing, the page teems with pictorial imagery and scintillates with emotional values. Once he called my attention to a series of parallel lines which formed the foundation for the capital letter *D* in the word *Damn*able. "See those firm drawn lines," he said with some intensity; "they indicate rigidity of purpose, strength; they show my indomitable will." To the diseased mind, even the simple drawing of a line may have a symbolic meaning and an emotional content that is hard for us to understand, unless perhaps we get a hint from the *Einfühlung* (feeling in) theory of the aestheticians. According to this theory the psychology of symbolization cannot be explained by the ordinary laws of association, but we must consider it "an investiture of the object with the observer's own idea and feeling." As Lipps illustrates it, "I sympathize with the

[Doric] column's manner of holding itself and attribute to it qualities of life . . . " Now, if this is possible with the normal mind, on a normal emotional level, how much more possible is it for a disordered mind, which is hyper-responsive emotionally, and loves to run in allegorical channels. How natural for such a mind to animate its own art products and exhibit with great intensity this *Einfühlung*, this *Mitgefühl*, *Verschmelzung*, *Beseelung*. William Blake, the great symbolic artist and illustrator of Dante's "Divine Comedy" and the "Book of Job," once wrote of himself, in a letter, as follows: "Excuse my enthusiasm, or rather madness, for I am really drunk with intellectual vision, whenever I take a pencil or graver in my hand." Such must be the general description of the state of mind which hovers over the picturesque writing.

The grotesque conformation of the script, the sepulchral odor of the books, and the realization that they were penned with long and patient labor in the deep hours of the night by a man who considered himself the inspired amanuensis of the Almighty, combine to give this strange manuscript a weird, almost uncanny character. If we but had a complete account of the conscious processes involved, the volumes of picturesque writing would constitute a most valuable psychological document.



FIG. 1.



FIG. 2.



FIG. 3.

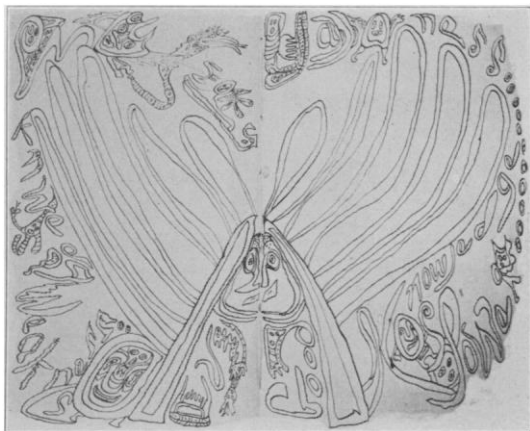


FIG. 4.



FIG. 5.



FIG. 6.



FIG. 7.

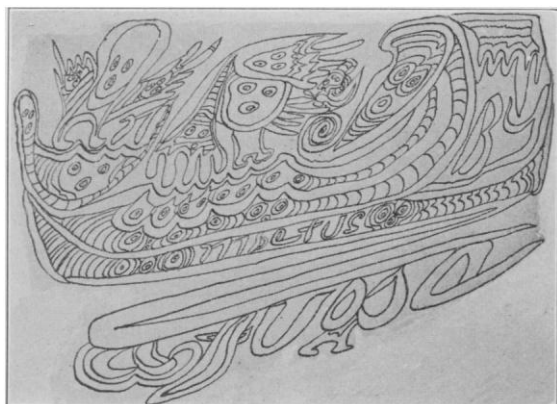


FIG. 8.

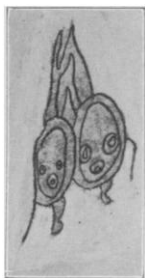


FIG. 9.

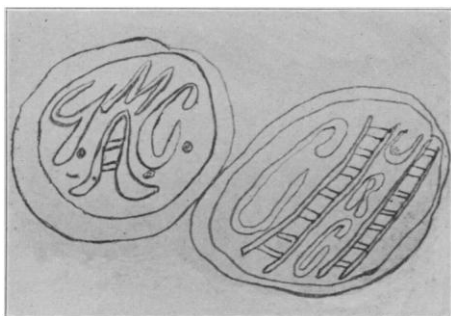


FIG. 10.



FIG. 11.



FIG. 12.



FIG. 13.

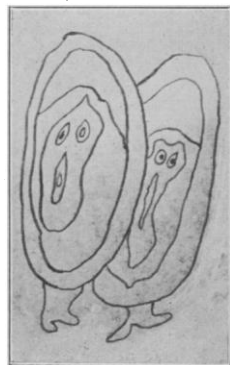


FIG. 14.

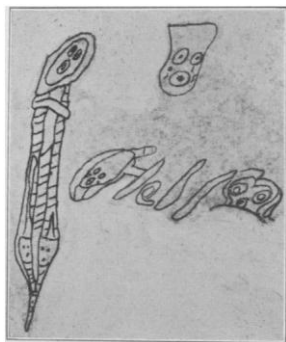


FIG. 15.



FIG. 16.



FIG. 17.



FIG. 18.